Whatever became of the short film?

By Tom Matthews
Associate Editor

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WHEN THEATRICAL SHORTS began to fade from movie screens in the early sixties, the sheer quantity of entertainment that had once been offered by the nation's movie houses was greatly diminished. It seems almost cruel to remind today's younger audiences, who are lucky if their $5.00 will buy them 90 minutes worth of entertainment, that it wasn't that long ago when a movie-going crowd could expect a cartoon, an invitation to sing along with a bouncing ball, a newsreel, a couple of trailers and *then* a feature film, all at a price that, today, wouldn't buy a decent magazine. A night at the movies wasn't thought of in terms of just the main attraction, but as a carefully packaged potpouri of filmed entertainment, of which the feature was only the *entrée*. The shorts, which were being produced and provided free-of-charge by the movie studios, were the *appetizers*.

As film critic and historian Leonard Maltin points out in his book "The Great Movie Shorts," *all* movies were shorts when the industry began. A featured attraction rarely ran over two reels, and it was only when pioneers like D.W. Griffith started pushing the boundaries of the medium and making longer, more complicated films that the short (usually between 10 and 20 minutes long) established itself as an art form all its own. These shorts were relatively inexpensive to produce and, by the advent of the "talkies," had already proved to be crowd-pleasers, so studios large and small quickly set up film units that turned out nothing but the mini-movies. The stars of these first shorts were generally acts from the silent era who were skilled enough to make the transition into sound, with Laurel and Hardy and Hal Roach's "Our Gang" kids being among the first to benefit from this new type of filmmaking.

Over the next three decades, old standbys like the Three Stooges and the episodic adventure serials were invented to satisfy the voracious appetite for shorts that the theatres had developed. The need to keep the flow of film coming often resulted in shorts that were quaintly shabby at best, but there was also a fair amount of filmic talent working on both sides of the camera. Soon-to-be-legendary directors like George Stevens and Frank Capra had served out their apprenticeships grinding out shorts, and it seemed for a while to be an ideal endeavor for the studios, both as a training ground for new talent and as an inexpensive way to supply their exhibitors with new product.

Annie Leibovitz

"Harlem Shuffle" by the Rolling Stones played in theatres across the country.

As the cost of producing and distributing feature films began to balloon in the late fifties and early sixties, however, the short began to wither. The number of features being produced annually dropped alarmingly and it made little economic sense to continue funding short films when that money could be applied to another, longer feature. In theatres across the country, the singing cowboy sang his last song, Moe Howard delivered his last eye gouge, and somewhere a cliffhanger probably ended with the promise "To be continued next week," but that next week never came. The studio-produced short, like white-gloved ushers and real butter on the popcorn, was gone.

To say that pre-feature entertainment has vanished completely from the theatre would be untrue, however. Modern Talking Picture Service, a distribution outlet which specializes in small, corporate-funded films that are offered free-of-charge to exhibitors, has been handling shorts for 50 years and continues to provide mini-documentaries on subjects that include everything from a look at auto racing with Paul Newman to a trip to the outer fringes of the Antarctic with a team of high-tech scientists. But instead of being funded by motion picture studios or by independent artists, the films being handled by MTPS are sponsored by either commercial or nonprofit organizations and always contain some kind of promotional message, and therein lies a problem. Onscreen advertising continues to be strictly forbidden by most exhibitors, and sponsored short films, no matter their content, are often considered to be little more than thinly-

veiled commercials.

"We have a very strong company policy about screen advertising, no matter how subtle or subliminal it is," says Victor Gattuso, vice president of marketing for General Cinema. "A lot of the films that we're asked to put on supposedly as entertainment always have some kind of subtle advertising in them, and our patrons just don't care for them."

Robert M. Finehout, vice president of Modern Talking Pictures, hears this complaint all the time and he's quick to rebut it. "Our films are very low-key (in the way that the sponsor promotes themself). Most sponsors and producers know that if they're going to get screen time, they have to have a good-looking product," Finehout insists, using as an example a Mercedes-sponsored short on equestrian show jumping that contains only the merest plug for the car manufacturer. "We've tried to maintain very high standards for the films that we choose to distribute, because we know that we're not going to get playdates if we have something that's inferior and is going to offend the audience."

Finehout goes on to point out that regardless of how the sponsor works their message into their film, their self-promotion is never as blatant as the product "plugs" which have become so common in *feature* films. With companies like McDonald's and Budweiser going to great lengths to have their products used as props within the body of a feature, Finehout feels that the concept of no advertising on the screen already has been compromised and that perhaps the idea is no longer as taboo to audiences as exhibitors continue to think. For the most part, however, Finehout's reasoning does little to convince theatreowners who are afraid of irking their patrons.

Still, MTPS reportedly books thousands of theatre dates a year with exhibitors who feel that the entertainment value of a short outweighs the stigma of screen advertising. These exhibitors have also found that if an audience member *doesn't* like the short, they might find their way out to the concession stand while they're waiting for the feature to begin. Artistic merit aside, some exhibitors like shorts simply because they help sell popcorn.

"I personally like to use them because it's a perfect way to have a concession intermission," says Salah Hassanein, executive vice president of United Artist Communications, a theatre circuit which books shorts on occasion. "If you don't have a short, you usually have to do all your concession business before or after the picture."

In addition to the titles available from MTPS, there is also the rising trend towards booking music videos into theatres (see BOXOFFICE, December, 1985). Despite the fact that these are also considered by a number of theatreowners to be little more than advertisements for record companies, these short and highly-visual music films have been embraced as a new art form by young audiences who have become fixated by MTV and other music television outlets. It has therefore become a little easier to book them, says Tom Hayes of Music Motions, the company which booked 106 prints of "The Harlem Shuffle," a music video by the Rolling Stones, into theatres earlier this year.

"The resistance from exhibitors is shifting a bit. Some people still do see music videos as advertising, but I think that for the most part people see this as promotable entertainment," Hayes says, adding that perhaps exhibitors have become over-sensitive to the advertising issue. "If a music film is sponsored, then I think that there is a certain amount of presence that the sponsor has *earned* for paying for the audience's entertainment, and I think that their name *should* come before or after the film. But this is entertainment we're putting up there—not entertaining trailers—and that's a promotable part of a theatre's presentation."

Music videos may come to represent the most ideal compromise between entertainment and advertising where the future of shorts is concerned, but for artistic films which come with absolutely no corporate strings attached there is Short Film Showcase, a distribution outlet which is funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. In the past, the Short Film Showcase offered a quantity of films chosen from annual competitions which the company held. The most creative filmmakers were awarded honorariums and their films were given nationwide exposure by Short Film Showcase, who booked them into theatres free-of-charge. Like the studio-produced shorts of old, these films were concerned with entertain-

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At the end of "To Whom It May Concern," a musical featurette distributed by MTPS, the hero presents his girlfriend with a diamond. The film's sponsor: The Diamond Information Center.

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Short Films

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ment rather than selling a product or a message.

Today, unfortunately, due to federal cutbacks, the company offers only one film: "American Picture Palaces," a 10-minute salute to the classic movie theatres of yesteryear. Funded by the Smithsonian Institute and hosted by Gene Kelly, the film is a smash and, according to project administrator Sol Horowitz, the company is hard-pressed to keep enough prints of it in stock. It is the kind of film that Short Film Showcase would like to be able to offer on a more regular basis, but without government backing, Horowitz says, it is impossible for the organization to provide the quantity of films that it once did.

Although short films are still here for the asking, their reemergence on a large scale seems highly unlikely. In addition to the aforementioned resistance to advertising, there is also the simple problem of shorts taking up too much valuable screen time. These days, a theatre has to show a film as many times as possible during the course of a day in order to recoup its house "nut" and show a profit. What with theatrical trailers and courtesy trailers vying for every extra minute of screen time, there just isn't that much room between shows anymore.

"We are very much committed to a trailer program of coming attractions and cross-plugs for what's playing in our other auditoriums," says Gattuso. "So between trying to put on as many features as possible for our patrons and telling them what we've got coming up in the future, we're pretty much booked up."

Still, as most distributors of shorts point out, *something* has to be done to bring the magic back into the movie theatre—maybe giving the audience a little something *extra* for their boxoffice dollar should be a part of that. Granted, shorts are not what they once were, but there is enough of a selection available *for free* today that exhibitors should be tempted to experiment with them, perhaps surveying their audiences first to find out if shorts would be well accepted. And if exhibition expressed an interest in showing them, maybe the sponsors of the films would work harder to make their shorts more a source of pure entertainment and less a vehicle for self-promotion. Exhibition's ills won't be cured this easily, but maybe a short movie on the screen could help to reduce the short lines at the boxoffice.

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